DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 583 CS 511 759

AUTHOR Houser, Marian L.

TITLE "They Have No Idea What I Need." An Investigation of Nontraditional Student Expectations of Instructor Communication Behavior.

PUB DATE 2002-11-00

NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association (88th, New Orleans, LA, November 21-24, 2002).

PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Adult Students; Communication Research; *Communication Skills; Higher Education; *Nontraditional Students; Nonverbal Communication; *Student Attitudes; *Teacher Behavior

IDENTIFIERS *Communication Behavior; *Teacher Immediacy

ABSTRACT

For years, instructional communication literature has been telling teachers to be verbally and nonverbally immediate and to achieve clarity in order to enhance student motivation and learning. Unfortunately, the primary source of these recommended instructor behaviors has been the traditional college undergraduate student between the ages of 18 and 23. A gap in instructional research ignores the diversity of undergraduate students as over 45% of college undergraduates in 1995-96 were above the age of 24 and 12% of them were over age 40 (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Researchers in adult education have recognized that student age and experience impacts judgment of certain teacher characteristics. In hopes of developing a more responsive education system for all students, this study investigates instructor communication expectations of nontraditional students. A comparison is made between "adult" student expectations of instructor communication behavior and immediacy and clarity behaviors reported as effective with traditional students. A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was followed with audio taped transcriptions of four focus group discussions. Categories of expectations and positive and negative instructor experiences revealed some being met and others negatively violated. Surprising expectations such as "student-teacher as peers" and "instructors learning from students" emerged. Few expectations and experiences overlapped individual verbal immediacy and clarity behaviors. No nonverbal immediacy behaviors were expected. This study may reflect adult educators' views that adults learn differently. Contains 36 references and a table of data. (Author/RS)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original document.

ED 474 583

They Have No Idea What I Need. An Investigation of Nontraditional Student Expectations of Instructor Communication Behavior

Marian L. Houser

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M. L. Houser

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Marian L. Houser is a post-doctoral faculty member and basic course director in the College of Communication, Department of Speech Communication, at The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996.

Direct correspondence to Marian L. Houser, Department of speech Communication, 298 Communications, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, 37996 (865) 975-0696, (865) 983-9059, or mhouser@utk.edu.

CS 511 759

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

They Have No Idea What I Need.
An Investigation of Nontraditional Student Expectations of Instructor Communication Behavior

Abstract

For years, instructional communication literature has been telling teachers to be verbally and nonverbally immediate and to achieve clarity in order to enhance student motivation and learning. Unfortunately, the primary source of these recommended instructor behaviors has been the traditional college undergraduate student between the ages of 18 and 23. A gap in instructional research ignores the diversity of undergraduate students as over 45% of college undergraduates in 1995-96 were above the age of 24 and 12% of them were over age 40 (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Researchers in adult education have recognized that student age and experience impacts judgment of certain teacher characteristics. In hopes of developing a more responsive education system for all students, this study investigates instructor communication expectations of nontraditional students. A comparison is made between "adult" student expectations of instructor communication behavior and immediacy and clarity behaviors reported as effective with traditional students. A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was followed with audio taped transcriptions of four focus group discussions. Categories of expectations and positive and negative instructor experiences revealed some being met and others negatively violated. Surprising expectations such as "student-teacher as peers" and "instructors learning from students" emerged. Few expectations and experiences overlapped individual verbal immediacy and clarity behaviors. No nonverbal immediacy behaviors were expected. This study may reflect adult educators' views that adults learn differently.

They Have No Idea What I Need
An Investigation of Nontraditional Student Expectations of Instructor Communication Behavior

Within the field of instructional communication there is considerable advice for classroom instructors concerned with meeting the needs of their students. Researchers suggest being nonverbally immediate—"move around the class while teaching" (Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987), verbally immediate—"ask questions or encourage students to talk" (Gorham, 1988), achieve instructional clarity—"give summaries when presenting content" (Simonds, 1997), as well as many other communication behaviors. The instructional literature has consistently told us that teachers who are clear, organized, and highly immediate with their students can expect them to be more motivated and learn more in class. What instructor wouldn't appreciate and strive to elicit these outcomes? Obviously, these instructor communication behaviors are meeting students' needs. However, are they meeting the needs of all students?

The primary source of these recommended instructor communication behaviors (immediacy and clarity) has been consistent: the traditional undergraduate student between the ages of 18 and 23. These are students who chose to pursue their college education immediately following high school. Most instructional communication studies are conducted with undergraduates during day classes at large four-year institutions. A gap in instructional research ignores the diversity of undergraduate students. Although different cultures are often investigated (e.g., "A cross-cultural comparison of instructor communication in American and

German classrooms," Roach & Byrne, 2001) in relation to communication variables, few focus on student age as an important or strong influential factor.

Many researchers in the field of adult education have recognized that student age impacts judgment of certain teacher characteristics (Beer & Darkenwald, 1989; Scheckley, 1988; Tracy & Schuttenberg, 1986). They conclude educators need to know what specific attributes traditional and nontraditional students want from an effective instructor and how to reflect those needs through classroom communication. In fact, according to Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon (1993), adult (nontraditional) and traditional students are "similar only in their identification of, and emphases on, teacher's personal organization, availability and warmth" (p 162). If this is the case, is past instructional research, specifically dealing with instructor immediacy and clarity, complete if it fails to take student age or time span between high school and college into consideration?

A sampling of recent research in instructional immediacy (verbal and nonverbal) and clarity reveals age is rarely an influential factor in the investigation:

> Participants for this study were 120 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in communication courses in a small, liberal arts university in the Midwest (traditional students, ages 18-19) (Carrell & Menzel, 2001).
>
> A total of 223 students enrolled in the basic communication course at a large Midwestern university agreed to participate in the study. The average age of participants was 19.5 (Titsworth, 2001).

> Participants were 167 undergraduate students in a large, upper-division service course in Communication Studies at a large Middle-Atlantic university. The sample consisted of 98 males, 64 females, and 5 participants who did not reveal their sex. The mean age of the sample was 21.68 with a standard deviation of 2.85 (Rocca & McCroskey, 1999).

Past instructional communication research advising instructors to be clear and immediate with their students have rarely considered age an influential factor. Is this acceptable when the adult literature reports differing instructor expectations for adult learners? Do nontraditional students perceive verbal immediacy, nonverbal immediacy, and instructor clarity the same as their traditional counterparts? Do they even find these specific instructor communication behaviors important?

Colleges today are experiencing a great influx of nontraditional students. In fact, according to the U. S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (1998), over 45% of undergraduate students in 1995-96 were above the age of 24 and 12% of them were over the age of 40. With this in mind, can we continue to group undergraduates together, regardless of age, and assume they all have the same needs and expectations of instructor communication? With the changing face of students in college classrooms today, what drives them, what are the best methods of communicating with them, what they want from and need from their instructors are important questions for research and in the development of a more responsive system of higher education.

Nontraditional Students in the Classroom

Defining nontraditional

Student age should be an important issue in instructional communication research today because nontraditional students, or those typically over the age of 24, constitute a large proportion of college undergraduates. Researchers in adult education have typically represented the nontraditional student as those above the age of 25 (Donaldson, 1989; Miglietti & Strange, 1998; Ross & Stokes, 1994; Polson, 1993). Although selecting age 25 as a "cut-off point" may exclude some nontraditional students (e.g., a 23 year old mother and wife), using this number to distinguish the two groups may ensure nontraditional students are those who have been raising families, working, or otherwise engaging in necessary life experiences besides college. Some may even be returning after an extended period of time because they failed in their first attempt at college. Nontraditional students have lived longer and therefore typically bring more life experiences to the classroom than their traditional counterparts, and these experiences impact both teaching and learning (Polson, 1993). A more comprehensive definition would describe nontraditional students as those who did not choose to attend college immediately following high school. Instructors need to know what is attracting these "adult learners" and what they can do to facilitate a positive learning environment (Viechnicki, Bohlin, & Milheim, 1990).

Malcolm Knowles (1978) developed the concept of andragogy in the United States as the art and science of helping adults learn. He recognized differences between child learners and the influence of traditional pedagogy and adult learners with his five basic principles of adult learning:

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy, 2. Adults' orientation to learning is life-centered, 3. Experience is the richest resource for adults' learning, 4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing,

5. Individual differences among people increase with age.

Why they enroll

Nontraditional students are entering the college classroom voluntarily to change their lives, locate new jobs, and acquire new skills and knowledge to enhance their earning potential. Many studies report nontraditional or adult students have a desire to boost self-esteem in their personal lives as well as the workplace. In other words, they feel a college degree can help them feel better about themselves, move up the ladder, or simply gain more respect in their job. West (1995) conducted a longitudinal study of 30 adult learners to discover their goals in entering college later in life. One of his primary findings was adult students enroll after experiencing personal crises. They reported a fragmentation in their lives associated with feelings of worthlessness, inadequacy, and a continuous pattern of declining respect. Gaining an education was the means to help them rebuild. Hensel (1991) suggests the desire to change careers as the primary impetus for adult enrollment in college. Zemke and Zemke (1984) suggest four reasons nontraditional students become motivated to re-enter the learning environment: a) adults seek out learning experiences in order to cope with specific life-change events such as marriage, divorce, job promotion, firing, moving, etc.; b) adults seek out learning experiences which are directly related—at least in their perception—to the life-change events that triggered the seeking; c) adults also may have a use for the knowledge or skill being taught so learning is a means to an

end, not an end in itself; and d) the learning helps increase or maintain their sense of self-esteem. In essence, most adult learners have a specific goal in mind when entering college—to make a difference and a change in their lives. Do nontraditional students have the same educational goals? Would this knowledge benefit college instructors?

Miglietti and Strange (1998) claim instructors should want to know why these nontraditional students are entering college. According to their research, instructors who create learner-centered classes (e.g., focus on student needs and interests, getting to know students as individuals, etc.) have students who report higher grades, a greater sense of accomplishment, and greater overall satisfaction with their education experience. Thus, as these students enroll in classes to improve their lives and careers, instructors can enhance their goals by focusing on the needs and expectations of their students. The field of adult education tells us much about adult learning needs but very little about how instructors should communicate with students to meet them.

Adult educators Donaldson, Flannery, and Ross-Gordon (1993) conducted one of the most closely related studies. They reported nontraditional students' perceptions of effective instructors. The instructor behaviors most frequently mentioned were: instructor knowledge, concern for student learning, clarity of presentation, motivation, relevance, enthusiasm, participation encouragement, creating a comfortable atmosphere, strong organization, and using a variety of instructional techniques. How do these perceptions compare to instructor immediacy and clarity behaviors reported as enhancing learning and motivating for traditional students?

These particular behaviors should be adapted to or investigated within the field of instructional communication.

Traditional Students and Instructor Communication

Past research has identified many instructor communication behaviors associated with student learning (Christophel, 1990; Frymier, 1994; Richmond, 1990) and motivation (Christensen & Menzel, 1998; Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Jassma & Koper, 1999) for students between the ages of 18 and 23. These positive outcome variables have been consistently linked to instructor use of nonverbal immediacy, verbal immediacy, and clarity in the undergraduate classroom.

Nonverbal immediacy was conceptualized by Mehrabian (1971) as communication behaviors such as smiling, touching, and eye contact that enhance closeness with others. In the classroom, these behaviors send messages that the instructor is interested in the student. This interest can lead to positive student outcome behaviors such as those suggested by Christensen and Menzel (1998) who reported a relationship between nonverbal immediacy behaviors and student motivation and learning. Separate from nonverbal immediacy, Gorham (1988) operationalized verbal immediacy as teachers' verbal behaviors such as use of personal examples and the use of "we" and "our" that increase student perceptions of closeness in the classroom. She determined that both verbal and nonverbal immediacy were associated with student learning. Research also indicates a positive relationship between learning and instructor clarity. Clarity was defined by Simonds (1997) as "the teachers ability to present knowledge in a way that students understand" (p. 279). In other words a teacher's ability to structure the material,

comments, and questions to students in a way that motivates and enhances their learning is a key to effective instruction (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971).

Research has consistently shown that nonverbal immediacy, verbal immediacy, and clarity are all valuable instructor communication behaviors associated with student learning and motivation. However, these studies have been conducted with traditional college students between the ages of 18 and 23. With over 45% of undergraduates now over the age of 24, is it wise for instructors to assume these communication behaviors are effective in all age groups? Do nontraditional students who have lived longer, encountered more and varied life experiences, and are perhaps entering academia to change their lives, have the same expectations of their instructors' communication? According to Knowles (1978) and Loacker (1986), the andragogical perspective proposes nontraditional students desire concrete, hands-on, practical information. Nonverbal immediacy, verbal immediacy, and instructor clarity may or may not meet their expectations.

Therefore, this study will take an initial step and investigate the communication expectations and needs nontraditional students have of their college instructors. Perhaps nontraditional students will also favor instructor communication behaviors that enhance learning and motivate traditional students. Through the use of focus groups and open coding procedures, a grounded theory of instructor communication expectations for nontraditional students is pursued. If we can identify these behaviors, perhaps we can expand our repertoire of instructional communication behaviors in order to reach the more diverse student body present in the new millennium. With this in mind the following research question is put forth.

RQ: What are instructor communication expectations of nontraditional students in the college classroom?

Method

For this study, a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was chosen because it allows the researcher to discover inductively and explore the core variables that emerge within the study. Data collection was guided by a thematic sampling approach. This strategy is based on the need to continue collecting data in order to examine developing categories and their relationships. In this way, the researcher can be more certain that a category indeed exists. Thus, in this case, data collection and analytical processing occur simultaneously (Barnes, 1996; Glaser, 1978; Star, 1998; Strauss, & Corbin, 1998; Taylor, Beck, & Ainsworth, 2001).

Focus Groups

Four focus groups consisting of 5-10 nontraditional students each were organized and assembled within a two-week period. The students met for one hour in a conference room on campus with the researcher serving as moderator. The mean age of student participants was 35. After assuring each student complete anonymity, groups were audio taped and then transcribed and coded following each session. The goal was to examine the categories and note their existence in future groups (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In order to avoid future groupthink in the focus group discussions, each student was given an index card as they entered the room and asked to write down their thoughts to the question: "How does a good teacher communicate

in the classroom?" By doing this, the hope was for them to begin developing personal thoughts and responses for the group's discussion.

In order to facilitate discussion, an interview guide was utilized with each group and consisted of the following questions:

1. How do you expect your classroom instructors to communicate with you both inside and outside of the classroom?
2. What do you expect a good instructor to say or do in your class to make the material clear?
3. What actions/behaviors do you expect of a good instructor both inside and outside of the classroom?
4. What are things you expect your instructor to say in a positive instructional setting?
5. How much guidance do you expect on your class projects or assignments? Do you expect opportunities to create your own learning/assignments?
6. How do you learn best? Do you expect or prefer lectures in order to learn?
7. Do you expect to be able to share personal information or relate your own experiences to the subject matter being discussed in class?
8. Do you expect to meet with your instructor outside of class?

The interview questions prompted stimulating and open discussion, with one focus group meeting lasting over two hours. If a group member began to dominate the conversation, individuals who had not contributed were asked to respond to the question being discussed. Each student was paid $10 for their participation following completion of the meeting.

Transcripts

Once all the focus group tapes were transcribed, open coding procedures were utilized (Strauss, A., & Corbin, J., 1998). All instructor communication behaviors, whether positive or negative, were highlighted and sequentially numbered. A thematic sampling approach enabled the author to detect emerging categories within the focus group discussions. The three major categories produced in the transcripts were "positive instructor communication behaviors previously experienced by nontradtional students," "negative instructor communication behaviors previously experienced by nontraditional students," and "expectations of positive instructor communication behavior in the classroom." After listing student responses within each category, a cut-off minimum of 7 responses was established. This enabled the researcher to compare statements reported most frequently by the students (e.g., Many expectations were only mentioned by 1 or 2 individuals and therefore failed to establish a pattern from group to group.) Two subcategories that also emerged to support positive and negative experiences in the classroom and expectations of instructor behavior were "responses to positive instructor communication behaviors experienced in the classroom" and "responses to negative instructor communication behaviors experienced in the classroom." Two coders were trained to identify and categorize the instructor communication behaviors in the transcripts. A .90 intercoder reliability was achieved.

Results

Specific patterns were noted in the three categories that emerged from the focus group discussions. Overall, there was greater agreement in the "expected instructor behaviors" for the nontraditional students. With the cut-off point set at 7 responses per expectation, 10 categories emerged for the "expected instructor behaviors," 4 categories emerged for the "positively experienced instructor communication behaviors," and 9 categories emerged for "negatively experienced instructor communication behaviors." It appeared easier (and there was greater agreement) for the students to think of their expectations and negative experiences than it was to come up with positive instructor communication experiences. There was also significantly less student agreement among the 4 positively experienced communication behaviors. These results are listed in Table 1.

---

insert Table 1 about here

The most frequently mentioned "expected" instructor communication behavior (n=26) was "instructor open-mindedness of student opinions during frequent class participation/discussion." An example of student support for this behavior was,

> "I like to build on things and relate things in an in-depth discussion. You can't learn if you don't voice your opinion. It's a give and take. If you can communicate with your instructor in class I think you learn more. Instead of just scribbling down in your notes."

While this was the most preferred or expected behavior of the nontraditional students in the focus groups, it was surprisingly absent from the list of "positively experienced" behaviors. Unfortunately, if this is what these students want it does not appear to be what they are getting in class. The most "negatively experienced instructor communication behavior" (n=25) was what they termed "fill-in-the-blank teaching," which was also described as teaching straight from the book with students regurgitating information leaving no time for class discussion. The response (subcategory for "negative instructor communication experienced") students expressed from this type of teaching was anger at being forced to "learn on my own." In other words, they described their best learning as occurring during the open class discussions. As one student put it,

> "They put the material up on overheads and then read them to you. I can pull out my notes and read this. I want to hear what THEY think. It's useless if they can't tell me what authors we read are saying and elaborate on them."

The second and third most "expected" behaviors received equal responses. Students in these categories expect their instructors to "know them as individuals" (n=24), "respect their diversity and adapt to their uniqueness" (n=24). Together, this was perhaps the most positive outcome to this study as this expectation was also the most "positively experienced instructor communication behavior" by the nontraditional students (n=16). Although not as many experienced it as those who expected it, nonetheless, they stated that most teachers knew their names and showed the students they cared about them. One student stated,

> "My accounting professor doesn't treat us like we're just another social security number. He knows who we are and know we have a life outside of class. One day he even moved

a test because he could tell we weren't ready. It made us feel good and we worked harder."

While it was certainly a encouraging to have student recognition and caring significantly reported as both "expected" and "positively experienced," it is important to note, however, that it was also included among the "negatively experienced communication behaviors." Obviously, not all nontraditional students feel they are known or are recognized as unique from other more traditional students. This behavior fell to the bottom of this list of instructor behaviors (n=7) but was mentioned by enough focus group members to be considered troubling.

The other most "expected" communication behavior was an instructor's ability to "offer and elicit personal examples relevant to the material" (n=24). The nontraditional students consistently stressed a desire to understand the value of course concepts by relating them to their personal life experiences. These students felt they had lived long enough to be able to speak on many issues from a personal point of view. As a response to this "expected" behavior, they felt instructors would be learning from their students. Many participants echoed the sentiments of these thoughts:

"It's a learning process not just for us, but for them. You never stop learning. It should be more of an exchange and maybe bringing in the experiences of students in which then the professor can turn around and use later on. You're there to learn something, but the professor also learns from you. They don't necessarily know it all either."

"I have experience in the real world, and I can teach some of these teachers things. If they were open to learning from their students too, I think that would be really good. A

really good teacher does that. Every time you teach a class you should learn something also."

Also described as an "expected" behavior for the nontraditional students was a desire for the teacher to convey their love and enthusiasm for the subject-matter and teaching (n=22). This student's comments summed up the views expressed in the focus groups:

"The need to be interested. You can tell when a professor really loves their subject. They get really excited about it, and they want to give you their knowledge. Their lectures really draw you in and give you a chance to relate."

This positive "expectation," unfortunately, is contradicted by "fill-in-the-blank teaching" previously mentioned as the most "negatively experienced communication behavior" (n=25). As two students emphatically expressed,

"If they teach you straight from the book that you've already read, I get so mad. Why do they do that? Don't waste my time. Give me the handout!"

"I have a class right now and it's almost pointless for me to go to the class. She uses powerpoint slides and they are exactly what we read the night before."

"Flexibility in class rules" was also a commonly "expected instructor communication behavior" (n=16). Even though this behavior was not at the very top of the list, it was perhaps the one that created the most heated discussion. These nontraditional students expressed extreme frustration at instructors who create rigid rules and never bend on them. In fact, this category earned the same number of responses as one of the top "negatively experienced communication behaviors"—"rigid instructor/inflexibility with rules" (n=16). One of the primary complaints

involved attendance being tied to class grades. Since this was an area where the students were most vocal, there are numerous examples of these complaints.

> "Flexibility is really, really important. We need teachers who understand that not everyone in the class missed the quiz yesterday because they were an 18 year old who partied in the dorm all night."
>
> "There's no give at all. I don't want to have special privileges because I'm an adult. I just want a little flexibility. I realize they don't live the same life. They made a choice to go to school when they were supposed to go to school. They didn't have a career first, or whatever. You can't expect them to understand. They have no idea what you're going through."
>
> "I'm being dropped down a grade level cause I missed 2 classes. So, I'm going from an A to a B because of my attendance. Just once, I'd like to hear them say, 'You know, you've done the homework, participated in class, and I know you're trying, so we'll just forget those absences.' It's such negative reinforcement."
>
> "If I miss a class it's my own fault. I missed out on the learning I needed to have that day."
>
> "I had a teacher who cut my grade on a project because I was in my living room holding my mother's hand while she was dying. She wasn't dead yet, so she said, 'That's not a valid excuse. Everybody has problems.' I think some teachers act like this in self-defense because they don't want to be overwhelmed by the 18 or 20 year old who are begging for excuses."

The responses to these "negatively experienced behaviors" were very disconcerting. These students felt belittled and demeaned. One of the primary feelings expressed (subcategory "response to negatively experience instructor communication behaviors) was "I feel like I'm in high school." This was very common. Perhaps even more discouraging were those who expressed such extreme frustration that they developed a lack of self-esteem and a "who cares" attitude. These students felt their class interest and involvement began to dissipate.

Another "expected" behavior that produced frustration when it was not communicated by the instructor was "teaching students what they need to know to master the subject-matter" (n=15). In other words, they expect their teachers to be content experts and convey this useful information in a timely and straightforward manner. Instructors who wasted time by telling too many personal stories, discussing irrelevant topics, getting sidetracked from the assigned reading, or simply "chit-chatting" with students in the room, were negatively perceived by these nontraditional students (n=11). In fact, at some point in each focus group they pointed out that they were paying for their own education and they expected to be learning at all times. "I'm here because this is my future," one student stated. Every group expressed shock at instructors who wasted their time and at students who appeared to enjoy it. It caused them to feel the instructor lacked concern for the students as well as for their learning (n=7).

These nontraditional students want to learn and expect concern and respect from their instructors. In fact, many of them view each other as peers. Every group mentioned the desire to be "treated as equals" and "with respect" in the classroom (n=13). Whether during in-class

discussion, office hours, or through email, they expect professor's to treat them more as an equal partner in the learning process. Throughout the discussions, comments were made such as,

> "Interact with me. Be on my level. Don't be 'I'm the teacher, you're the student.'"
>
> "I'm the same age as most of my instructors and I expect to be taken seriously and treated with respect."
>
> "I don't want it to be a status thing. I have real life experience and they need to relate to me as a person."
>
> "They should want to know us on an intellectual level as well."

When these students noticed or were reminded of status differences between them and the instructors, they felt teachers were "demeaning" (n=20) and egotistical (n=9).

> "They make me call them Dr. The title isn't the person. That takes the human out of them."
>
> "I have one professor that, quite frankly, is full of herself, I think, because of the Dr. title. She says stuff like, 'Okay, you gotta listen to me. I'm giving you stuff you can't get anywhere else.' And then I go home and read it in the book. She corrects me if I don't call her Dr."

The primary response (subcategory to "negatively experienced instructor communication") to this imbalance in the student-teacher peer relationship is "tuning out." In other words, they are so dismayed and offended by their treatment that many of them said they refused to go to the instructor when they needed assistance—a discouraging response, indeed.

Discussion

Based on these focus group discussions, what we know is nontraditional students expect a great deal from their instructors' communication behaviors. Some of their expectations are being met, while many others are being negatively violated. These students primarily expect the following: to be recognized in their classes as students who take ownership of their learning, to share personal experiences which enhance their learning, to earn respect for their knowledge and experiences, to have their life circumstances understood, and to be treated as adults. Each of these expectations is reflected in both the positive and negative experiences they have had in the college classroom. While these findings certainly can guide instructors in classrooms where they encounter both traditional and nontraditional students, it could be more helpful to compare the results of these focus groups to the instructor communication behaviors we currently know are effective with traditional students. Since verbal immediacy, nonverbal immediacy, and clarity are associated with learning and motivation, perhaps nontraditional students also value these behaviors.

The verbal immediacy behaviors (Gorham, 1988) that certainly appear to be reflected by the nontraditional students are the following (expected behaviors from the focus groups follow each immediacy statement):

1. Use personal examples or talk about experiences she/he has had outside of class (as long as it is related to the class material this reflects elaboration on the topic)
2. Ask questions or encourage students to talk (class participation/discussion)
3. Address students by name (know students)
4. Ask how students feel about an assignment, due date or discussion topic (flexibility)
5. Be addressed by his/her first name by the students (equality/peer-relationship)

The only behavior that would seem to violate their expectations would be "Have discussions about things unrelated to class with individual students or with the class as a whole." The nontraditional students clearly stated they had paid for their education and expected to be learning at all times.

The clarity items (Simonds, 1997) that reflect expectations expressed by the nontraditional students in the focus groups were as follows:

1. Uses examples when presenting content (examples used to elaborate material)
2. Relates examples to the concept being discussed (elaboration assists learning)
3. Stays on the topic (doesn't waste time)
4. Points out practical applications for coursework (assists in learning/relevance)

The only items that could possibly violate the expectations of positive instructor communication behavior could be "Uses the board, transparencies, or other visual aids during class," and "Communicates classroom policies and consequences for violation." While these two clarity behaviors are obviously examples of an instructor being clear in their expectations and enhancing their lecture material, the nontraditional students described abuses in these two areas. They expressed frustration over instructors who read transparencies or powerpoint slides that regurgitated textbook information. In addition, while rules may be necessary, when used as punishment, nontraditional students felt humiliated and belittled. Instructors should use caution in these two areas if they hope to meet nontraditional students' expectations.

The nontraditional students' expectations of instructor communication behaviors showed no overlap with the nonverbal immediacy items (Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987). While not what this researcher had hoped to discover, in hindsight this is not actually surprising. Just because the nontraditional students did not list them as "expected" instructor behaviors, does

not mean they would react to them negatively (Frymier & Weser, 2001). It would be interesting in future research to discover if these nonverbal immediacy behaviors, while not expected, were still positively perceived by nontraditional students.

This study reflects what adult educators have been saying for years—adults learn differently (Donaldson, Flannery, & Ross-Gordon, 1993; Knowles, 1978; Polson, 1993). However, what we now know has more to do with what they expect from instructors' communication rather than how nontraditional students learn. Therefore, a path for future research would be to discover whether instructors who fulfill these positive communication expectations, create enhanced student learning and motivation.

In addition, it would be interesting to discover how different the nontraditional students are from traditional students in their expectations of instructor immediacy and clarity. They have consistently been viewed as positive behaviors in the instructional research, but perhaps they are less important for the nontraditional students.

Though a small number of nontraditional students were represented in this study, the focus groups and thematic sampling technique provided rich, descriptive data. This is new information, which should be tested and evaluated in future research to discover how well the findings reflect the instructor communication expectations of nontraditional students throughout higher education. The field of education has consistently studied differences in traditional and nontraditional student learning and their perceptions of effective teaching. Yet, while instructor communication behaviors are often embedded within the research, it has never been the primary focus. If we can understand what it is nontraditional students desire from their instructors'

communication and delve more deeply into the student-teacher communication exchange, then perhaps we will not only enhance student learning but also improve our teaching.

References

Barnes, D. M. (1996). An analysis of the grounded theory method and the concept of culture. Qualitative Health Research, 6, 429-437.

Beer, C. T. & Darkenwald, G. G. (1989). Gender differences in adult student perceptions of college classroom social environments. Adult Education Quarterly, 40, 33-42.

Carrell, L. J. & Menzel, K. E. (2001). Variations in learning, motivation, and perceived immediacy between live and distance education classrooms. Communication Education, 50, 230-240.

Christensen, L. J. & Menzel, K. E. (1998). The linear relationship between student reports of teacher immediacy behaviors and perceptions of state motivation, and of cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning. Communication Education, 47, 80-90.

Christophel, D. M. (1990). The relationship among teacher immediacy behaviors, student motivation, and learning. Communication Education, 39, 323-340.

Christophel, D. M. & Gorham, J. (1995). A test-retest analysis of student motivation, teacher immediacy, and perceived sources of motivation and demotivation in college classes. Communication Education, 44, 292-306.

Donaldson, J. F. (1989, March). An examination of similarities and differences among adults' perceptions of instructional excellence. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, CA.

Donaldson, J. F., Flannery, D., & Ross-Gordon, J. (1993). A triangulated study comparing adult college students' perceptions of effective teaching with those of traditional students. Continuing Higher Education Review, 57, 147-165.

Frymier, A. B. (1994). A model of immediacy in the classroom. Communication Quarterly, 42, 133-143.

Frymier, A. B. & Weser, B. (2001). The role of student predispositions on student expectations for instructor communication behavior. Communication Education, 50, 314-326.

Glaser, B. G. (1978). Theoretical sensitivity. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative inquiry. Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Gorham, J. (1988). The relationship between verbal teacher immediacy behavior and student learning. Communication Education, 37, 40-53.

Hensel, N. H. (1991). Accommodating the needs of adults in teacher education. Adult Learning, 2, 20-26.

Jassama, M. A. & Koper, R. J. (1999). The relationship of student-faculty out-of-class communication to instructor immediacy and trust and to student motivation. Communication Education, 48, 41-47.

Knowles, M. S. (1978). The adult learner: A neglected species (2nd ed.). Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing Company.

Loacker, G. (1986). What research says about adult learning. NASSP Bulletin, 69, (486), 38-40.

Mehrabian, A. (1971). Silent messages. Belmong, CA: Wadsworth.

Miglietti, C. L. & Strange, C. (1998). Learning styles, classroom environment preferences, teaching styles, and remedial course outcomes for underprepared adults at a two-year college. Community College Review, 1, 1-20.

Polson, C. J. (1993). "Teaching adult students." Center for Faculty Evaluation and Development, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. 395 136).

Richmond, V. P., Gorham, J., & McCroskey, J. C. (1987). The relationship between selected immediacy behaviors and cognitive learning. In M. McLaughlin (Ed.), Communication yearbook, 10 (pp. 574-590). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Roach, K. D. & Byrne, P. R. (2001). A cross-cultural comparison of instructor communication in American and German classrooms. Communication Education, 50, 1-14.

Rocca, K. A. & McCroskey, J. C. (1999). The interrelationship of student ratings of instructors' immediacy, verbal aggressiveness, homophily, and interpersonal attraction. Communication Education, 48, 308-316.

Rosenshine, B. & Furst, N. (1971). Research in teacher performance criteria. In B.O. Smith (Ed.), Research in teacher education. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Ross, R. & Stokes, C. S. (1994, November). Implications and strategies for instruction of the nontraditional student in the conventional basic speech communication course. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

Scheckley, B. (1988). The best and worst classroom experiences of adult learners. Proceedings of the Transatlantic Dialogue Conference (pp. 381-386). Leeds, England.

Simonds, C. J. (1997). Classroom understanding: An expanded notion of teacher clarity. Communication Research Reports, 14, 279-290.

Star, S. L. (1998). Grounded classification: Grounded theory and faceted classification. Library Trends, 47, 218-232.

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Taylor, E. W., Beck, J., & Ainsworth, E. (2001). Publishing qualitative adult education research: A peer review perspective. Studies in the Education of Adults, 33, 163-179.

Tracy, S. J. & Schuttenberg, E. M. (1986). Exploring adult learners' rationales for course interaction preferences. Adult Education Quarterly, 36, 142-156.

Titsworth, B. S. (2001). The effects of teacher immediacy, use of organizational lecture cues, and students notetaking on cognitive learning. Communication Education, 50, 283-297.

U.S. Department of Education. National Center for Education Statistics. (1998). "Profile of undergraduates in U.S. postsecondary education institutions: 1995-96." NCES 98-084.

Viechnicki, K. J., Bohlin, R. M., & Milheim, W. D. (1990). Instructional motivation of adult learners: An analysis of student perceptions in continuing education. The Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 38, 10-14.

West, L. (1995). Beyond fragments: Adults, motivation and higher education. Studies in the Education of Adults, 27, 133-156.

Zemke R. & Zemke S. (1984). 30 things we know for sure about adult learning. Innovation Abstracts, 6 (8), 1-4.

Table 1

Instructor Communication Expectations and Positive and Negative Experiences of Nontraditional Students

Instructor Communication Behavior	Number of Student Responses
Expected Instructor Communication Behaviors	
1. Open-mindedness during in-class participation/discussion	26
2. Know students as individuals/respect diversity/adapt to uniqueness	24
3. Use personal examples/relate real-life student examples to lectures	24
4. Enthusiasm/Passion for subject-matter/exhibiting teaching desire	22
5. Flexibility in class/rules/absences	16
6. Expert in subject-matter/teach important & useful information	15
7. Treat students as equals/respect/taken seriously	13
8. Instructor self-disclosure/2-way exchange of personal information	11
9. Organized/Structure in syllabus/class routine/on task with material	10
10. Informal atmosphere/comfortable/personal & conversational	7
Positive Instructor Communication Behaviors Experienced = Subcategory: Responses	
1. Recognize students/respect as individuals/diverse opinions	16
2. Examples bring subject to life/reflect student experiences=increase participation and clarifies material	15
3. Contact with students out of class (email, phone, appointments)=students value grades & develop confidence	7
4. Exhibit passion for subject/desire to teach students/positive=confidence & positive view of instructor	7
Negative Instructor Communication Behaviors Experienced = Subcategory: Responses	
1. Fill-in-blank teaching/lecture/regurgitation = anger & and learning on own	25
2. Demeaning & belittling students/talking down = feel like a child/"who cares" attitude frustration/anger/tension	20
3. Excessive Rules/rigidity/punishment for absences=belittled/demeaned/highschooler	16
4. Waste class time/chit-chat/off topic	11
5. Straight lecture/no participation or discussion=tune out instructor/keep opinions in	9
6. Egotistical Teacher/stress Dr. title	9
7. Unclear class goals & learning expectations	8
8. Students are social security numbers/no names	7
9. No concern for students and their learning	7

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS 511 759

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)
Reproduction Release (Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: "They Have No Idea What I Need." An Investigation of Nontraditional Student Expectations of Instructor Communication Behavior	
Author(s): Dr. Marian L. Houser	
Corporate Source:	Publication Date: NCA 2002, Nov.

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, Resources in Education (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign in the indicated space following.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 1 documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2A documents	The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all Level 2B documents
PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY SAMPLE TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)	PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY SAMPLE TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)	PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY SAMPLE TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
Level 1	Level 2A	Level 2B
☒	☐	☐
Check here for Level 1 release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g. electronic) *and* paper copy	Check here for Level 2A release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only	Check here for Level 2B release, permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits.
If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at Level 1.

I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated above. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche, or electronic media by persons other than ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for non-profit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquiries.

Signature: Marian L. Houser	Printed Name/Position/Title: Marian L. Houser / Faculty/D		
Organization/Address: 293 Communications University of TN Knoxville, TN 37996	Telephone: 865-983-9059	Fax: 865-974-4879	
	E-mail Address: mhouser@utk.edu	Date: 2/4/03	

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:
Address:
Price: